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Jonathan L. Ready, *Character, Narrator, and Simile in the Iliad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. ix, 323. ISBN 9780521190640. $90.00.

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Preview

Jonathan Ready's book discusses a large number of Iliadic similes, among them some of the most famous and interesting ones. The title of the neatly produced volume could readily suggest a conventional New Critical treatment of Homeric similes in which the author explores how figurative levels of the epic contribute to characterization and the development of the plot. In a way, this is exactly what happens: the book abounds in meticulous close readings of individual Iliadic passages, engaging deeply not only with the Homeric text, but also its critical heritage. Ready's methods and perspectives, however, can hardly be characterized as conventional. From the outset to the conclusion he argues, clearly and forcefully, that similes are both "mechanisms and sites of competition" (2), that is, the *Iliad* uses them in various ways to "enhance the agonistic element in its mortal characters' interactions" (271). This perspective necessitates a redefinition of the Homeric simile as well as a revision of some of the received critical approaches to such images. Ready effects both these measures, and the resulting interpretations, while certainly open to future challenges, often break new ground.

After the brief Introduction setting out the purpose and the scope of the volume in general terms, the first chapter, entitled "The Simile and the Homeric Comparative Spectrum", embarks upon a theoretical discussion of similes. Instead of conventional (rhetorically derived) definitions based on the formal characteristics and/or the length of a given trope, Ready proposes to distinguish between similes on the basis of the distance they exhibit between tenor and vehicle. To account for the various degrees of likeness between the comparanda Ready introduces the idea of the "comparative spectrum" (15–16) spanning from lesser to greater similarity and accommodating figures from "simile" (where the distance between tenor and vehicle is greater, e.g. a hero is "like a lion") to "comparison" (where there is more likeness between the terms of comparison, e.g. Hera, terrified of Zeus, is like "one terrified" (*Iliad* 15.90)) to "likeness" (where the distance is

presented as ambiguous, e.g. Odysseus points out that Euryalos is like “one who is reckless” (*Odyssey* 8.166)). Further, Ready shows that degrees of likeness can vary even within these categories: there are similes and comparisons in which the distance between tenor and vehicle is greater or smaller than in others. Although particular cases might well be contested due to the inevitable element of subjectivity in judging similitude, the proposed “comparative spectrum” certainly provides a convenient tool for understanding the diversity of Homeric figuration, and also, more importantly, widens the scope of investigation by making it easier to compare and contrast figurative elements of the text which from a strictly rhetorical point of view would fall into different categories.

This widened focus is apparent already in the second chapter (“Similes and Likenesses in the Character Text”) where Ready starts to explore those figures of similitude which appear in the characters’ speeches, and includes in the discussion even formulaic noun-epithet combinations (e.g. ἐπιείκελος ἀθανάτοισιν (*Iliad* 4.394). While some critics seem to be in denial about the presence of similes in speeches, it has long been noted that some of the major characters of the *Iliad* do resort to such (shorter or longer) figurative devices. One of the great virtues of Ready’s volume is the persistent attention directed to these tropes; in later chapters he considers the ways in which such images interact with their communicative context (i.e. the narrator’s text or another character’s reaction), here he focuses on those individual similes whose contribution to the agonistic aspects of the epic is less direct insofar as they help distinguish characters in “the competitive and crowded linguistic arena” (85) of the epic without directly challenging either the narrator or another character. The centerpiece of the chapter is clearly the discussion of similes used by Hektor and Achilleus in the critical moments of Book 22 (*Iliad* 2.123–128, and 262–266, respectively). In these interpretations Ready convincingly argues for the importance of similes in the characters’ self-presentations, and although some of his conclusions might seem somewhat overingenious,[1] his unraveling of the traditional background of these tropes as well as his careful and thorough engagement with the immense critical literature on these remarkable sections of the epic make for inspiring and thought-provoking criticism.

Not that the subsequent chapters lack critical acumen. In what constitutes the main body of the volume, chapters 3–6, Ready presents scores of close readings surveying and assessing the critical tradition for many Homeric similes from antiquity to the most up-to-date developments. As the short theoretical preparation in Chapter 3 (“A Preparation for Reading Sequences of Similes”) makes clear, the focus of these chapters is on the explicitly agonistic aspect of similes as they interact in verbal duels, between character- and narrator-texts, or within the narrator-text itself. Two key concepts introduced by Ready to explore the “competitively oriented sequences of similes” (107) are “reuse” (the recycling of the same subject or detail in pairs or sequences of similes) and “recharacterization” (when a second simile, or even a sequence of similes is deployed to re-present the actor(s)). Drawing on both ancient and modern comparative material, Ready

argues that both these processes tend to be instrumental in verbal dueling, and sets out in the following chapters to test his hypothesis on several levels of the *Iliad*'s text. Again, the methodological flexibility of Ready's approach allows for a wider focus: the investigation focuses not only on those similes which exhibit the same vehicles, but also on those presenting different images.

Chapter 4 ("Sequences of Similes in the Character-Text") discusses some of the most memorable verbal confrontations in the *Iliad*, the complex exchange between the Trojan elders, Priam, and Helen in Book 3 as well as what Ready calls "Dueling Spoken Similes": the flyting between Paris and Diomedes in Book 11, Nestor's refashioning of Odysseus's simile in Book 2, and Phoinix's reply to Achilleus's speech in Book 9. Owing to the different positions and the relationships of the speakers, the competitive element figures differently in the individual scenes discussed: whereas in the *Teikhoskopia* we witness how similes function in a polite social context ultimately to distinguish Helen, in the verbal duels the agonistic potential of these tropes is much more pronounced. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is again Achilleus who steals the show: Ready's interpretation of the bird-simile in the hero's famous speech (*Iliad* 9.323–325), as well as the image of the caring father in Phoinix's reply (9.481–482) aptly showcases the conflict between Phoinix's "reciprocal ethic of familial […] responsibility" and Achilleus's "model of a solitary, underappreciated warrior" (147).

Chapter 5 ("Narrator, Character, and Simile") takes the investigation of the agonistic element in Homer's figurative language to another level: Ready here focuses on how characters might compete with the narrator over and through simile. The theoretical underpinning of the proposal to conceive of the relationship between narrator and characters in competitive terms is unquestionably solid; however, it seems that in this chapter Ready is much more tentative than in other parts of the book. This is sometimes apparent in the phrasing (e.g. "we can speculate" (173), Menelaus "can be thought of as challenging the narrator through and over simile" (201)), but also in the fact that Ready himself uses a number of synonyms for "contest" or "competition" (such as e.g. "interaction" (153), "challenge" (173), "engagement with the narrator's previous figures" (191), "build on" (209)) which strike the present reviewer as more accurate to describe what takes place in the text. Indeed, the insistence on the agonistic character of these narrator-character interactions sometimes results in involved, not entirely convincing interpretations.2 That said, Ready's readings of the individual similes are usually erudite and interesting, and provide a good platform for further interpretive controversy (I would especially highlight his sensitive criticism of Gaca's recent position on Achilleus's "little girl" simile (*Iliad* 16.5–11)).3

Chapter 6 ("Similes in the Narrator-Text") turns to the tropes that most interpreters of the Homeric epics have been concerned with, the similes in the narrator's text. Besides demonstrating the possible agonistic orientation of such images in the discussion of key scenes from Book 22, Ready employs the useful concept of the "spotlight" to describe "the attention the

poet gives to his characters" (223). In a poem whose plot is to a large extent built on retardation (i.e. the long absence of Achilleus from the battlefield) it is natural that a large number of characters will compete for readers' attention, and Ready's interpretations helpfully show how similes are instrumental in training or extending the spotlight on characters. This section is especially interesting from the perspective of the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle(s) of the Homeric simile: instead of taking any sides on the moot question of the extent of correspondence between the comparanda, Ready's readings bring to the fore the flexibility and the wide range of possible applications of Homeric figurative language. While not all will agree with Ready's particular interpretations,4 his innovative use of the critical term "spotlight" can be expected to influence the critical vocabulary of not only Homerists, but also those critics whose narratological interests lie elsewhere.

After such wide-reaching and perceptive chapters, the short conclusion ("Conclusion: The *Odyssey* Compared") comes as somewhat of an anticlimax. Ready argues convincingly that, in contrast to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, "making a different argument about mortal interaction, does not so energetically deploy similes in a competitive manner" (271), and he also raises useful and important questions about the role of figurative language in understanding (263–264), but in light of these issues and the earlier insights one would perhaps expect more far-reaching conclusions. For example, it would be interesting and instructive to see, at least in brief, whether Ready's findings are specific to Homer or survive in the classical epic tradition. Most of all, however, one misses from this chapter a more comprehensive interpretation of the *Iliad*, a definite section about how all the documented figurative competition, all the training, extension and focusing of spotlights (to use Ready's own terms) contribute to the epic's sinister subject of μῆνιν . . . Ἀχιλῆος and Διὸς . . . βουλή which looms large in the background throughout the poem, even when other characters seem to claim temporary precedence. The absence of such an overarching conclusion, however, does not diminish the merits of Ready's book. *Character, Narrator, and Simile in the Iliad* engages with, and often provides fresh solutions to some of the evergreen problems in the interpretation and criticism of Homeric similes, and as such will probably be of great use to all Homeric scholars.

Notes:

1. Most notably the contention that Hector's reverie in his soliloquy is in effect part of "an ethical attack on Achilleus and what he represents" (61), or the proposition that Achilleus uses his fable-inspired similes of lions, men, and sheep to emphasize "his current disdain for the conventions of his society by distancing himself from heroic epic, a prominent mechanism for the reaffirmation of that society's values" (68).
2. E.g. the claim that the complex reflection on nature and culture in Paris's simile (*Iliad* 3.60–63) answers "not only Hektor's insults but the narrator's

similes as well" (209), even though these similes are thirty lines apart in *Iliad* 3.21–37).

3. See Kathy L. Gaca, "Reinterpreting the Homeric Simile of Iliad 16.7–11: The Girl and Her Mother In Ancient Greek Warfare." *American Journal of Philology* 129.2 (2008): 145-171.

4. His interpretation of the vehicle of the ash tree simile in *Iliad* 4.482–489 seems to me far-fetched, at least in part. Ready is correct to point out that in the image of the chariot-maker Aias "moves into the spotlight" (256–257); however, I do not see in what way the association of chariot-making with *Trojans* (mentioned in two other places in the *Iliad*: 5.193–194, and 21.37–38) might support this interpretation of the image.

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